

May 2, 2007

**Statement by Congressman Pete Stark
Supporting Reauthorization of Head Start**

Madam Speaker, I rise today in strong support of the Improving Head Start Act of 2007 (H.R. 1429).

Since 1965, Head Start has served millions of low- income families and helped children prepare for school. It is an essential program and one whose success has a major impact on children, their families, their community, and ultimately the future of our country. We owe it to our children to pass this bill and make improvements that strengthen and grow the Head Start program.

Scientific research shows us that 80% of brain development occurs by age three and 90% by age five. Studies also show that education achievement gaps between poor and minority students and affluent and non-minority students are already in place when children begin elementary school. These achievement gaps, once in place, tend to persist and are exceedingly difficult to remedy. Head Start and Early Head Start are effective in closing achievement gaps and foster both short and long-term success in participating children.

In addition to preparing children for success in school, recent research clearly demonstrates that children enrolled in Early Head Start and their parents realize other very significant gains. Early Head Start children show better approaches to learning, demonstrate more appropriate language acquisition, and exhibit less aggressive behavior. Early Head Start parents create a stronger home environment with more parent-child reading and a greater repertoire of discipline strategies. Early Head Start parents also show significant progress toward economic self-sufficiency. These impacts are significant and result in children with increased linguistic, cognitive, social and emotional competence. What better investment could we be making for our children?

Unlike programs dreamed up by ideologues in the Bush Administration like “abstinence only

education” and “marriage promotion,” we know that Head Start works. Unfortunately, less than half of eligible children are enrolled in Head Start. Even worse, less than five percent of eligible infants and toddlers are enrolled in Early Head Start.

If we are serious about providing all children with an opportunity to succeed in school and in life, we must expand Head Start and particularly Early Head Start. This bill is a step in that direction. It will more than double the amount of money available to Early Head Start programs. The bill will also expand services to infants and toddlers that are so crucial to child development, but often difficult for parents to access. In addition, the Improving Head Start Act will increase eligibility levels so that children from families making up to 130% of the federal poverty level can participate. This change is especially important in areas of the country with high costs of living, including my district, where the poverty threshold is well below what it actually costs a family to live.

This bill’s expansion of Early Head Start and Head Start should be applauded. We cannot lose sight, however, that these programs only address the tip of the iceberg. This Congress must focus more of our attention on all children birth to age five and guarantee that all families have access to high quality comprehensive early care and education programs. This is an investment that our country must make if we are serious about giving all of our children a chance at the American Dream.

Despite the strong bipartisan support for this legislation, the White House has indicated that the President does not support this legislation as written unless we insert a special interest provision for the religious right. The President and many Republicans want to allow religious organizations to discriminate in their hiring practices. Religious organizations have been Head Start providers since the program was established and have done quite well playing by the same rules that prohibit all employers from discriminating. Pandering rhetoric and veiled threats from the White House will not improve the life of a single family.

In closing, I hope that all of my colleagues will see the importance of investing in our children and supporting families. I urge a yes vote on this legislation and a no vote on Republican attempts to turn this into a vehicle for religious discrimination.